

Justice, History and Safety

By Charlie Pearl
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Hilly Schiffer

As general manager of facilities for the Administrative Office of the Courts, architect Garlan VanHook serves as a ninth member of the Franklin County Project Development Board, which will oversee the site selection and construction of a new judicial center. He's a nonvoting member except to create a quorum, if necessary, or to break a tie vote.

About 40 new judicial centers have been completed in Kentucky since VanHook went to work at AOC in 1998. Currently, 36 more projects are under way, including Franklin County's. He talked recently with Staff Writer Charlie Pearl about the Franklin County judicial center and some of AOC's goals for new facilities.

Are there problems with building an addition to the old Franklin County Court House rather than a new stand-alone judicial center?

The historic courthouse just simply doesn't have the floor plan arrangements and relationships and adjacencies that allow for the security and the proper general function of the courtroom with the context of modern court activities. You also have the problem of marrying the architectural styling " the idea that additions to make the proper space oftentimes will overwhelm the existing court facility just from the sheer size of the addition that's necessary to accommodate all of the space requirements that meet our criteria of the modern court program.

So \$30 million has been allocated for this new judicial center. Does it have to be a stand-alone facility or can it be an addition?

We have developed a program for creating judicial centers that provides for the security of a single-point entry, and the management of the building being a 100 percent judicial facility. We have found in our experience the courts are better served because of the magnitude of the program, and the development from the county point of view and the judicial point of view that buildings that continue to be shared continue to present the idea of shared maintenance. When something needs to be done, the county has to come up with its portion of the money. In a 100 percent judicial facility, when it is serving the AOC, when things need to be done it becomes my responsibility to find the allocations and promote the management and the changes, or the cost associated with those maintenance items or improvements, that need to be made.

The bottom line is, that clarifies the relationship between the county and the court of justice for duties and responsibilities in managing the project. But it also provides that the courts are organized in a functional way " in a way that's articulated by a program, by a criteria, and by a budget that we can look into the future and manage as well as we possibly can.

You asked the question, is it mandatory? That's probably not really easy to answer other than to say our program is not designed around additions to existing or historic facilities. That's not to say there aren't conditions where that could be applied. But it takes study and a commitment of understanding architectural relationships of size, scale, impact on the block, impact on the community when it's done. Certainly the preferred way and the plans we have laid out for our program of capital improvements across the state has been one that is primarily a single, identifiable court of justice building.

Can you describe what the interior of the new judicial center will look like?

No, because we've hired creative and experienced court architects to work that out for us at the direction and the pleasure of the Project Development Board. Our criteria and our program don't articulate volume, style, the ability of an architect to create a space, interesting spaces in design concept. Our program is about getting the right amount of money for the right program with the criteria needed to make the project function. And then the creative part belongs to the community, the architects and the Project Development Board.

So they're not all cookie-cutter courthouses?

We do not have cookie-cutter courthouses. Anybody who believes that's the design process we have coming from the Court of Justice, I would respectfully ask that they visit some of the new court facilities. Go to Fayette County. Visit the new facility in Bardstown. Go to Johnson County and look at the building there.

Project Development Boards are designed and put together as a broad spectrum of people. You have the county represented with the county judge-executive and the magistrate. You have the bar association included. You have the elected judiciary that's going to work and live in the building and help manage the building. There's a citizen at large on the Project Development Board. There's an AOC representative. Project Development Board members are not paid. They're stepping up to say we're doing something important for our community. We're promoting improvements to justice.

The safety issue is not just about securing a judge. It's making a safe place for the people to be so people don't bring weapons into the courtroom. And that doesn't just protect the judge. It protects the witness, the jury, the person on the stand, the person that's being tried, and all the general public witnessing a particular proceeding. So it's a comprehensive program.

What is a truly functional judicial center supposed to look like as far as AOC is concerned?

The concept of a modern judicial center is three independent circulation paths: a judicial circulation path, a secure circulation path and then the access the public has to the building. The public will come in the front door. All of the hallways will not be open but they will be asked to walk through a metal detector, potentially put briefcases, etc., on an X-ray machine. The judiciary, they enter in the building from a different path. They are not required to interact with the front lobby. They are allowed to approach their bench

from a secure environment and they're allowed to retreat from their bench to a secure environment.

Persons in custody are brought in the building through a third avenue. They interact neither with the judiciary nor the general public. The only time the three parties come together is in the courtroom, unless you are permitted by access, or by virtue of the security locks, back to the judicial chamber. The judge controls that lock on the secure hallway.

Is site selection tough in every county?

Site selection is always tough because in some ways it's the first decision the board has to make. Aside from hiring their design professionals and their construction professionals they've got to decide where is the good, logical and long-term place to build this project.

Do you have a favorite site in Frankfort?

No, I don't have a favorite site. As a member of the Project Development Board I want to see them all. I want to have a little more understanding of what all the options are before I would zero in and say.

How many times has eminent domain come into effect on new judicial centers projects? Eminent domain has come into effect on a couple of instances. Counties and fiscal courts have followed through. None of them have ever gone to trial. I think they all have settled for what was an agreed and fair market escrow. We've been fortunate.

How many years should this new judicial center serve the community?

We certainly want to believe this building is going to serve us well 50 years into the future. We hope it's longer. As an architect, I do. And I know Louis & Henry would like to believe they have an ability to leave a legacy of competent and high-quality work.

Take a guess, in 50 years will we have a lazier society or a more physically fit society, where people would rather park their cars several blocks away from the judicial center and walk farther to get there?

Well, I'm knocking on the door of age 50. All through my life, we've always wanted to park closer to the door. There is a certain amount of being closer to the door that is a psychological condition. When you are parking at the outer edge and the end of the row at Wal-Mart, you are not really any closer than a block to the inside. You will get just as wet running down that parking lot as you would around the corner and down the block in the more urban area. I would suspect that human nature, from the standpoint of how convenient we want things, would want it even more convenient " where we hardly have to step out of our car. We might want drive-through justice.

Does it matter to AOC how high the building goes?

An urban environment provides for different decision-making, visually for the architects. Louis & Henry was the architect for the judicial center in Jefferson County. I believe it's a 10-story building. I think maybe in Franklin County there may be some historic and zoning limitations.

But you don't have to follow those restrictions if you don't want to, do you?

While the zoning law may not govern or regulate us, I am satisfied we are going to be respectful to the community in every way. If those issues are relevant, we are wanting to give them due consideration and be respectful to them without a doubt.

How important is it to AOC to have green technology and energy-efficient buildings?

I personally believe architects that do their job well, in a lot of ways, are inadvertently going to provide some of those green and efficiency kinds of items. Technology provides some of that. But good, due diligent architectural design work and architectural engineering brings that just with good practice.

While we are extremely interested in being as efficient as we can, we have had some meetings with some of the executive branch departments that are looking into some revisions and modifications to our standards. We have some goals right now on some of the projects to get at least a minimum Energy Star rating for our projects.

How many new judicial centers have been completed in Kentucky in recent years?

It should be in the neighborhood of 40 plus projects completed since I came to work (at AOC) in 1998. Thirty-six projects right now are either under design, construction, or hiring professionals, like Franklin County.

Are you pleased with how things are going so far with the Franklin County project?

I think the Franklin Project Development Board is doing great. They've been very business-like. They've been very poignant in their discussions, and yet they've been very cooperative and respectful of the job we have to do. It's a great thing that the Kentucky Bar Association representative is gathering up the people he represents to ask, "What do you think?" They all don't have to think alike. They obviously aren't going to think alike.

It's incredible that (former Circuit) Judge Sam McNamara has stepped forward to get their opinion and to participate with them in an open forum. I was unable to attend our public hearing. But I heard about how well and professionally (architect) Rick Kremer handled and presented the meeting to the public and the Project Development Board. I think everybody should keep their enthusiasm and maintain the level of energy that we've had to date, and I think we will have a great, successful project.

What statewide judicial center projects are your favorites, architecturally speaking?

They are all a little bit like a child. The work to get them up and running, and to select the site, and to choose a design and approve layouts, make choices for woodwork and color " they all have significance and importance. They're all relevant to being what our program is all about. They have all improved the communities. There is a flavor out there that comes from all the different architectural firms. And even the firms that do repetitive projects for us, the judicial centers don't look the same. They have a sensitivity to that.

Louis & Henry did the Jefferson County Judicial Center, a 10-story structure. But they have also given a very unique characteristic to the project they're doing in Boyd County. The beauty of them is childlike. They are all personable. These projects also are the people of the community: the judges, the county judges and magistrates that you meet and interact with. The different flair and flavor that goes with each one of these projects is a unique thing in Kentucky. I'm completely honored and humbled by the fact I am involved in that situation, and have the job I do. I hope I'm leaving the people of Kentucky the best it can be.